

## 54th Venice Biennale

various venues 4 June to 27 November

Bice Curiger, director of the 54th Venice Biennale's curated exhibition 'ILLUMInations', observes that art today is 'characterised by collective tendencies and fragmented identities'. She sees contemporary art as a 'seedbed for experimentation with new forms of "community" and for studies in differences and affinities that will serve as models for the future'. These claims are abundantly demonstrated in many of the national pavilions, more so, I think, than in the Arsenale displays. What interested me most about this edition of the Biennale was the attention that curators paid to recuperating for future use the many forms of community and affinity that have been developed by experimental artists in the past. In the former east European pavilions in particular, commissioners have opted to showcase the practices of 1970s-generation pioneers.

Departing from the usual aesthetic shock-and-awe approach of previous curators in the monumental Russian pavilion, Boris Groys offers a sober survey of Andrei Monastyrski and the 'Collective Actions' group's activities since the 1970s, entitled 'Empty Zones'. One component of the show is a grey, shoulder-high plywood maze, perhaps in homage to Ilya Kabakov's installation strategy, housing black and white videos, photographs and Collective Actions' documents on paper, resembling a homage to Ilya Kabakov's installation strategy. The highlight of the ground floor, meanwhile, is a neat hole in a wall with a piece of rope sticking out. A tangled coil on the floor, paradigmatically process-based, is the result of spectators' collective efforts to determine how long the rope might be. How long is a piece of string? Not so long, it seems. If we want to recreate the pleasurable uncertainty of pulling it out, we have to thread it back through the hole in the wall, for it is already extended to full length. Provoking yet frustrating spectators' desire to participate, the installation suggests the limits of participation. The rope is a DIY tool for confirming that what you see is what you get in Conceptual Art, and that this is all you can hope to get. Reading this as a political metaphor for the end of communism, we would have to conclude that even when it seems abundantly clear that the thing has come to an end, the desire to see if it can't, after all, be unravelled some more remains unshakeable. In another room, looped, pixelated colour films show a man holding a small red book in a snow-filled landscape, attended by a faithful dog. The cumulative impact of these components conspires to confirm Groys's long-standing characterisation of Moscow conceptualism as 'romantic'.

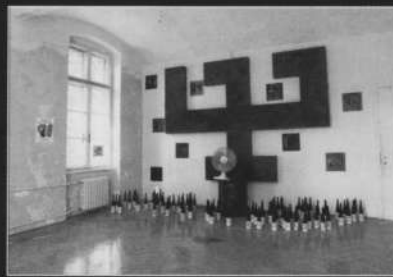
Holes have also been drilled into a wall in the Croatian pavilion, where the exhibition – entitled 'One Needs to Live Self-Confidently... Watching' – is dedicated to the occasionally pornographic conceptualism of the legendary structuralist filmmaker and experimental artist Tomislav Gotovac. Looking through one of the holes, we find that our peeping is being surveyed and relayed back to us. The choreography of this corridor-like pavilion, sandwiched between Turkey and India, has been cleverly delegated by curatorial collective 'What, How and For Whom' (WHW) to Zagreb-based theatre collective BADco. BADco boldly take on both the problematic space and treat Gotovac himself as a problem, transforming the site into an installation called *Responsibility for Things Seen: Tales in Negative Space*. Gotovac's conviction back in 1998 that 'everything is directed, everything is really some sort of a conspiracy', becomes

the group's leitmotif. If WHW's intention was, as they say, 'to downplay the recuperation of his opus within the narrative of Croatian national art history and the usual clichés of the underrepresented dissident who fought for freedom in the dark times of communist repression', they undoubtedly succeed. Nevertheless, despite my admiration for the conceptual rigour of the strategy – they describe the space as an 'analytical laboratory' – my feeling was that the time-based work of Gotovac (who died last year) was accorded insufficient breathing space within the claustrophobic framework. The exception to this rule was allowed by a diagonal screen partitioning off a corner for the private viewing of Gotovac's 'Home Porn Movies' *Family Film 1*, 1971, and *Family Film 2*, 1973. The installation is certainly full of wit and energy but runs the risk of occluding rather than elucidating Gotovac's accomplishments for those unfamiliar with his work.

The Romanian pavilion adopts a similar strategy, showcasing the work of Romania's best-known 1970s experimental filmmaker and artist Ion Grigorescu, in dialogue with that of two younger artists Anetta Mona Chişa and Lucia Tkáčová. 'Performing History' sets out to present a 'trans-generational dialogue structured around the idea of art as an alternative, unrestricted and obstinate performance of history'. Among Grigorescu's many recent and historical short films there is included a fragment of the unforgettable film *Ame*, 1977, in which the artist appears to circumcise himself and wrestles with a kitten trying to escape from between his legs. His deadpan, isolated, transgressive experiments of the late 1970s are interestingly brought into play with more recent introspective works, such as *Hamlet*, 1998, and *Yoga*, 2011. For their part, Chişa and Tkáčová humorously stage themselves wrestling with the spectre of the communist past in their film *Try again. Fail again. Fail better*, 2011. It shows them struggling to retain control of an oversized fist-shaped silver balloon on a windy hilltop. Although Grigorescu undoubtedly takes centre stage, his photographs and projections were defaced by the younger artists shortly before the opening (with his permission) by spray-painted, bright orange, stream-of-consciousness reflections on the politics of biennialisation, beginning: 'The curator bets on the artist, not the artist on the curator or everything or nothing mission or ambition. Contract or conflict. Trust or control ...' The graffiti offer an added critical dimension to what, in the end, still remains a well-deserved eulogy to Grigorescu, who has pursued his exploration of existential and psychological questions with great integrity since the 1970s, proving that they remain as relevant, post-1989, as they appeared before.

1970s-generation Belgrade performance artist Raša Todosijević occupies the Serbian pavilion. He appears to have been left largely to his own devices in designing the project 'Light and Darkness of Symbols' and has taken the opportunity to include almost everything he has ever made. The result is that the more recent assemblages and sculptures (among others a concrete bath with strip lights in it and a wonderful selection of teapots filled with cement, designed to explore the relationship between form and content) overshadow his earlier, and to my mind more interesting work. I would have liked to see a stronger critical metanarrative in place to frame Todosijević's examination of nationalist symbolism. As it stands, the vast, mixed-media series 'God Loves the Serbs', while highly suggestive, remains politically ambivalent, alluding to and yet retreating from the specificities of Serbian history.

Marina Abramović, meanwhile, whose *Balkan Baroque* at the 1997 Venice Biennale dealt far less sparingly with the excesses of nationalism invoked by her student-day Belgrade colleague Todosijević, represents



Antonio G Lauer  
aka Tomislav Gotovac  
*Showing the Elle Magazine*  
1962/2011 performance

Dragoljub Raša Todosijević  
*God Loves the Serbs 2000*  
installation

Regina José Galindo  
*Looting 2010*  
video still

Yael Bartana  
*Assassination 2011*  
production photo

Montenegro this year. The project *The Fridge Factory and Clear Waters* sees the inauguration of the Marina Abramović Community Center Obod Cetinje, billed as a 'driving force for reanimation' designed to 'create a network for linking-up of individuals, groups, institutions, ideas and initiatives in the contemporary international cultural context', and to develop economic and service ventures to reanimate the Obod factory compound and the revitalisation of the entire town of Cetinje. This clearly resonates with the contemporary emphasis on 'community' observed by Curiger.

Community building of a more ambitious but perhaps inevitably fantastical nature is proposed by the exhibition in the Polish pavilion: '...and Europe will be stunned'. Poland's first national representation by a non-Pole has been taken on by Israeli artist Yael Bartana and her political movement The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland that calls for 'the return of 3,300,000 Jews to the land of their forefathers'. Her highly affective trilogy of films *Mary Koszmary (Nightmares)*, 2007, *Wall and Tower*, 2009, and *Assassination*, 2011, are likely to antagonise all implicated parties in equal measure, proposing controversial remedies for Polish anti-Semitism and alternatives to the Palestinian right of return. Through what the pavilion organisers call 'an experimental form of collective psychotherapy', Bartana's films explore the viability of realising 'the longing for the Jewish past among liberal Polish intellectuals', urgently experienced by the influential young

group Political Critique, with whom she collaborated in realising the project. But the author of the trilogy insists that she is concerned with the 'universal presentation of the impossibility of living together', and the 'complexities of cultural integration' globally, going well beyond the troubled history of two nations. This installation is not to be missed.

My personal highlight of this trip to Venice, though, was an exhibition about democracy and radical art originally intended for the National Museum in Warsaw (but withdrawn after the forced demission of Director Piotr Piotrowski, whose proposal for a Critical Museum in Warsaw was rejected). Curators Andrzej Turowski and Grzegorz Musiał's 'Particolare. Art That Sparks Unrest' at the exquisite Palazzo Dona is a brilliant show that spirals around a simple one-word projection by Giovanni Anselmo. Moving from the 'Years of Lead: 1968-1978' to the 'Hope of Solidarity: 1980-1989' and beyond, 'Particolare' brings together many artist 'dreamers', 'demonstrators' and 'anthropologists' in an intimate exploration of the status of the 'individual, separate and exceptional' within modern democracies. ■

**Particolare. Art That Sparks Unrest** is at the Palazzo Dona until 27 November.

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